AMERICAN VOTERS INCREASINGLY MOTIVATED BY FOREIGN POLICY

By Stephen Kaufman
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WASHINGTON, SEPTEMBER 16 -- U.S. foreign policy is on the minds of enough American voters that a candidate's positions on how he or she would work with the international community can be the deciding factor in an election. The growing importance of foreign policy issues also comes at a time when the American electorate is the most polarized in recent history on how to interact with the world.

According to Professor Miroslav Nincic, a political science expert at the University of California at Davis, although many Americans long have appeared to have little understanding or concern about international issues, "foreign policy does matter sufficiently to a large enough percentage of the electorate to a have a significant electoral impact."

In his upcoming article "External Affairs and the Electoral Connection," to be published in Eugene Wittkopf and James McCormick's book The Domestic Sources of American Foreign Policy, Nincic analyzes the issues that motivate American voters and finds that although foreign policy was the most important issue to only 10 percent of voters in 2000, "fully half of the electorate considered foreign policy as the most important influence on their presidential voting decision" in 2004, with increased concerns regarding terrorism and the situation in Iraq.

Nincic makes the point that U.S. presidential elections are often decided by very thin margins, with a 7.7 percent average gap between the votes received by the main Democratic and Republican candidates since 1968, including three elections that were won by less than 3 percent. Those statistics make even the 10 percent figure in 2000 significant to the final outcome.

"This means that external affairs could make the difference between victory and defeat, since even voters who do not consider foreign policy the most important issue [still] often deem it important enough to affect their voting decision," he writes.

In an interview with USINFO, Nincic said overseas observers should not be "terribly" concerned over the limited knowledge Americans have of the day-to-day conduct of foreign affairs and the specifics of foreign countries, despite the continued influence and importance of the United States in global politics and the global economy.

Many Americans are ignorant of their own country's politics as well, he said, and "when you get to foreign policy, the ignorance is somewhat greater, but it's a matter of degree, not of kind."

During a time when an increasing number of American voters have foreign policy issues in mind when they cast their ballots, Nincic said, the population also is more polarized over how to address those issues and advance U.S. interests on the world stage.

Opinions differ as to whether to pursue policies that primarily benefit the United States or advance the broader global community, whether to pursue them unilaterally or through multilateral means, or whether to use armed force or diplomacy as a preferred foreign policy tool.

Nincic said that although the worldviews of Democratic and Republican voters and candidates "aren't perfectly predictable … there is much less blurring of party lines on foreign policy than there was 30 years ago, or 40 years ago or during the Cold War."

He based this conclusion on regular surveys conducted by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, which showed a major gap between those who identified themselves with one or the other party. That gap "probably stems from a major difference in basic worldviews associated with liberal and conservative political ideology," he said.

Nincic said party lines will blur in conditions of "national emergency or perceived conditions of natural emergency," which he described as a "rally-around-the-flag effect." But he added that intense threats are not very common, and the blurring of party lines that occurs in these instances "doesn't last very long."

Despite the September 11, 2001, terror attacks on New York and Washington, Nincic does not view terrorism as a "total threat from the perspective of the American people," as communism was viewed during the Cold War struggle, arguing that most Americans "really do not regard terrorism as nearly as great a threat as they did international communism and nuclear weapons."

The divergence of views among Americans on the significance of the terrorism threat has "given politicians even more room for rhetoric than they had before," he said. "It is not so much that American foreign policy has become polarized because the public has wished it to become polarized, but because the leaders have polarized the public."

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